Ruminations on University Presses And the Future of Academic Fiction

By ROBERT WYATT

WHEN THE Louisiana State University Press announced a couple of years ago that it would publish—and therefore subsidize—a certain amount of fiction, I reacted with mixed emotions.

While I am aware that first novels, experimental novels and other works of quality have difficulty attracting a publisher, I somehow dislike the prospect of fiction subsidized by foundations,

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universities and bureaucracies. And the prospect of the development of a particular genre of "academic fiction" made me numb.

I view the circumstance as a sad commentary on the state of public taste, the economics of publishing and the quality of art. I do not react to subsidies out of conservatism. Rather, I dislike them because they shift the the artist's obligation away from the public and diminish the necessity for at least some concession to popular appeal.

Somehow I prefer to embrace the naive belief that excellence in literature demands both profundity and popularity. I abhor the prospect that a coterie of academics might spawn a brand of university fiction matched only by the triviality and obscurity of much faculty research.

I REMIND myself that the history of literature indicates that many of the great authors have been most popular—that a Homer, Vergil, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dryden, Wordsworth, James or Faulkner (despite a rough start) commanded great recognition from their contemporaries and that the notion of the poor, undiscovered, struggling genius is largely a Romantic and sentimental myth. (Yes, I am aware of the historical role of patronage.)

sure, plunked down their pences to see a lot of junk (Beaumont and Fletcher, Massinger). But Shakespeare was still the most popular dramatist of his day and made enough money out of the London stage to go home to Stratford and buy just about the largest house in town.

Too, I remind myself that sometimes more than a hundred review copies of novels—most of them trash—flood the offices of this newspaper in a single week. Granted, most books lose money and are thereby essentially subsidized by best sellers. But with such a profusion of trash, can much of quality go begging?

WHEN LSU in 1977 published a novel by Madison Jones, a Vanderbilt alumnus and former Nashvillian, I felt some of my fears had been justified. The book, *Passage Through Gehenna*, lacked popular appeal, was morally and theologically confused, and was poorly developed. It read much as a third-generation Fugitive imitation would be expected to read and looked over its shoulder at the distinguished past of Southern fiction rather than forging directions for a more fruitful future.

Oh no, I thought, here's a book by a university professor whose work is being promoted by another university's press because certain academics view his style as an indication of where Southern fiction should still be going rather than charting where it has already been.

I DOUBT now that my worst fears will come true. University presses across the land, squeezed economically, are indeed turning away from the scholarly monograph ("The Offstage Doctor in the Plays of Thomas Medwell: A Symbiotic Structuralist Approach to Disease Metaphors and Moral Ambiguity in Pre-Shakespearean Drama") to more popular forms of writing, including regional history and popular art forms. But the fiction they publish will rarely make profits. And once an author achieves visibility, he is likely to be snatched up by the major trade publishers.

And LSU has now done ~~But LSU has now~~ something phenomenal to redeem my fears. It has just published a work of fictional genius which seems destined to achieve a wide following, even if it doesn't quite make the best-seller lists.

It's a posthumous novel by John Kennedy Toole, a New Orleans native who wrote this book, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, before committing suicide in 1969. His mother hounded novelist Walker Percy until Percy read the book and assisted in securing its publication.

As Percy has it in the foreword: "Here at any rate is Ignatius Reilly [the protagonist], without progenitor in any literature I know of—slob extraordinare, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one—who is in violent revolt against the entire modern age. . . ."

More on that later.

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Although LSU Press is generally the most distinguished and consistent Southern university press, Tennessee's own university presses are acquitting themselves quite well.

Both the University of Tennessee Press and the newer Memphis State University Press are publishing much of statewide interest.

Memphis State's county history series is receiving excellent reviews. UT's publication of Richard Beale Davis's three-volume *Intellectual History of the Colonial South* brought the author, a professor emeritus at the Knoxville campus, a National Book Award in 1979. And UT will publish *Tennessean* staffer Charles Fontenay's *Estes Kefauver: A Biography* this fall.

Vanderbilt University Press, however, has not been so fortunate. Economic considerations have forced a number of private-college presses to curtail or suspend publication. Now, only an occasional volume carries the Vanderbilt imprint, such as Robert McGaw's *The Vanderbilt Campus: A Pictorial History* and the continuing project, *The Correspondence of James K. Polk*, the fifth volume of which has just been published.

This fall, Vanderbilt plans to publish a study by art historian Hamilton Hazlehurst entitled *Gardens of Illusion: The Genius of Andre Le Nostre*.